

Builder found Vikings washed up at pub

► 1930s builders covered up find under patio

► Boat is located after tip-off to academics

Jack Malvern

Archaeologists believe they have found the only intact Viking boat in Britain beneath the patio of a Merseyside pub. The 10th-century vessel was discovered in the 1930s by builders excavating the basement of the Railway Inn on the Wirral peninsula, but they covered it up because they feared an archaeological dig would disrupt their work.

The boat would have been forgotten had one of the builders not reported his discovery to his son, who passed the information on to academics at the University of Nottingham.

Stephen Harding, of the university's archaeology department, used a ground-penetrating radar to investigate the claim and located a boat-shaped object buried in the soil where it had been found nearly 70 years ago.

Professor Harding said that he was confident from the builder's description that it was a Viking transport ship and now hopes to prove it by raising up to £2 million for an excavation. If his theory is correct it will be the only Viking ship in Britain with a surviving wooden hull.

"The only ones in the British Isles we know about — unfortunately



Experts believe that a Viking transport boat, the only intact one in Britain, is lying underneath a Wirral inn

without any wood remaining — have been at Balladoole, Isle of Man, and Sanday, Orkney, with not much left to see apart from imprints in sand and some weaponry," he said.

"Waterlogged blue clay, in which the boat is buried, is the ideal environment for preserving material almost indefinitely — especially wood. It is an environment where bacteria can't grow. This is the same environment

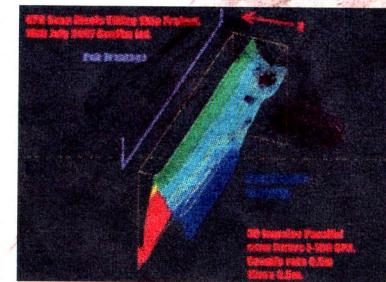
that the famous Viking ships in Norway — the Gokstad and Oseberg ships — were preserved in."

John McRae, the builder who found the boat, uncovered the bow and excavated 5ft before his foreman arrived, said his son, also called John. "The foreman, who was called Alf Gunning, came along and said: 'For God's sake cover it up. We don't want an archaeological dig to stop the

build'." The older Mr McRae eventually passed on details of his find to his son, who compiled a report and a sketch, which he gave to the University of Liverpool in 1991. It was filed, but no action was taken until Professor Harding heard rumours of the boat from a local policeman, who was able to put him in touch with the younger Mr McRae.

"People thought it was just a myth,"

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Radar scan of the underground find

Mr McRae junior, 69, said. "But we went up there with this ground-penetrating radar. When the results came back it showed the shape of a boat."

Professor Harding contacted Knut Paasche, a Viking ship expert in Norway, who said that the 30ft vessel resembled a transport ship. "If the boat had a keel and a sail it could have been used to go across the Irish Sea," Professor Harding said. "If you had six blokes in there as well as the sail you would be able to shift it at quite a pace — up to 20mph."

The depth and position of the boat suggest that it is very old, he added. "It is a clinker vessel, which means it has overlapping planks, a design that came from Scandinavia and of which the Vikings were masters. If it is not directly Viking or built by the original Norse settlers then it was constructed not long after by their near-descendants. It is probably not a burial vessel. It is probably too deep for that and there is no mound."